

BOOKS BY  
MARGARET SANGER

THE PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

WOMAN AND THE NEW RACE

HAPPINESS IN MARRIAGE

WHAT EVERY BOY AND GIRL  
SHOULD KNOW

MOTHERHOOD IN BONDAGE



MOTHERHOOD  
IN  
BONDAGE

By  
MARGARET SANGER



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## *Note*

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MARGARET SANGER

Willowlake,  
Fishkill, N. Y.  
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## *Introduction*

Thousands of letters are sent to me every year by mothers in all parts of the United States and Canada.

All of them voice desperate appeals for deliverance from the bondage of enforced maternity.

The present volume is made up of the confessions of these enslaved mothers. Selection has of course been necessary, since time after time the same tragedy of motherhood is repeated.

A word of explanation may seem necessary concerning my motives in publishing this painful and often heart-breaking testimony.

For several years popular editions of my book, "Woman and the New Race" have circulated widely—even into the most remote and inaccessible outposts of this continent. That book carried in simple and elementary terms the message of Birth Control as the surest instrument of the emancipation of enslaved womankind. Responses to this message continue to come to me in an unending stream. They have made me realize with increasing intensity that whoever kindles a spark of hope in a human breast cannot shirk the responsibility of keeping it alive. To these women, my name has become a symbol of deliverance—and I say this without vanity or egotism. Their tragedy lies not alone in the apparent hopelessness of their bondage, but in the fact that they have unburdened their souls to me, a stranger, because in their intuitive faith,

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they are confident that I might extend help denied them by husbands, priests, physicians, or their neighbors. The careful reader will discern in not a few of these appeals a fervent quality that suggests an inarticulate prayer.

That peculiar intensity of the appeal indicates, I am convinced, their despair—and the forlorn hope that has been kindled.

It is my hope that the intelligent reader will be sensitive to the message these records voice. For this reason I have decided to present them with the least possible editing or revision. I have abridged certain letters, and give excerpts from others, only from the effort to save space, to avoid monotonous repetition, or insignificant detail.

Repetition the readers will find, but significant repetition. It builds up the unity of this tragic communal experience. Despite all the differences, the story of motherhood in bondage is, by and large, the same story,—the same pattern of pain, except here producing the same cry for deliverance.

Having kindled the hope which is expressed in the letters which daily cover my desk, I cannot shirk the further responsibility of extending every aid it is within my power to proffer. It is my conviction that the publication of these profoundly human documents will do more toward the alleviation of the poignant miseries attested to than any other immediate step. Indifference is inevitably the result of ignorance. If the great, prosperous and generous American public is brought to a realization of the tragedies concealed in the very heart of our social system, I am confident that it will recognize the importance of

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measures advanced which aim to prevent their recurrence in the future.

At times I have been discouraged and disheartened by the deliberate misrepresentation of the Birth Control movement by the opponents, and by the crude tactics used to combat it. But at such moments invariably comes back into my mind the vision of the enslaved and supplicant mothers of America. I hear the low moan of their cry for deliverance—a vision ever renewed in my imagination by the perusal of these letters. Painful as they are, they release fresh resources of energy and determination. They give me the courage to continue the battle.

Similarly, when I am confronted with arguments against Birth Control, arguments which are as a rule presented by learned theologians or indefatigable statisticians, this dim far-off chorus of suffering and pain begins to resound anew in my ears. How academic, how anæmically intellectual and how remote from throbbing, bleeding humanity all of these prejudiced arguments sound, when one has been brought face to face with the reality of suffering!

An easy and even a pleasant task is it to reduce human problems to numerical figures in black and white on charts and graphs, an infinitely difficult one is it to suggest concrete solutions, or to extend true charity in individual lives. Yet life can only be lived in the individual; almost invariably the individual refuses to conform to the theories and the classifications of the statistician.

In selecting a comparatively small but representative number of the thousands of letters from enslaved mothers who have appealed to me, I have resisted a temptation to classify, or to attempt to reduce complicated human prob-



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lems to a rigid system of percentages or decimals. It would likewise be a fallacy to seek to draw general conclusions from the insufficient and usually fragmentary testimony presented. Although the squeamish may denounce this book of human documents as an unnecessary exposure of human horrors and clinical cases, its essential value consists precisely in the uncanny power of these naïve confessions—unguarded, laconic and illiterate as many of them are—to make us see life as it is actually lived close to the earth, without respect for the polite assumptions and conventions of sophisticated society.

This power to bring the reader close to the heart of motherhood in bondage makes these records dramatic—they possess all the naked power of old folk-ballads or tales. Some are stark and almost Biblical in their brief narration. They are as poignant in what they leave unsaid—but which we can read between the lines—as in their amazing revelation of fact. What writer of fiction has more briefly or more heart-breakingly revealed the tragedy of a whole life? One young woman has written in a few lines: “My mother died when I was only seven and father worked me in the fields just the same as the house until I was eleven then he put me out of a home just simply told me he didn’t want to see me there when he got back from town. So it meant for me to go which I did and no one told me anything. I was just kicked from one place to another. . . .”

But out of all the varieties of experience and humiliation recorded, a definite unity emerges. Each letter contains the record of a woman caught in the toils of unwilling maternity, enslaved not only by the great imperative in-

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instincts of human nature—hunger and sex—but hopelessly enmeshed in this trap by poverty, heredity, ignorance, the domination or the indifference of the husband, the timid passivity of the family physician, and the ever-increasing complications of successive pregnancies.

Even when it is carried out in the best conditions provided by modern hygiene and prenatal care, childbearing is an extremely hazardous undertaking. It is a comfortable assumption of the majority of unthinking people that all children in America are brought into the world surrounded by the care and attention which is given to the birth of babies of the upper middle classes. Such people do not realize that it is still possible in these United States for women to milk six cows at six o'clock in the morning and to bring a baby into the world at nine. The terrific hardships of the farm mother are not to the least degree lightened by the problem of maternity. Unmitigated hardships go on as usual, and if she and her newborn infant survive, it is only to face them anew, and with additional complications.

Whatever the disadvantages suffered by the poor city mother, these records indicate that they are as nothing as compared with those of the lonely farm slaves condemned to unwilling pregnancies, brutally bestial lords and masters, and an almost total deprivation of the ordinary comforts of life. "I have to carry my babies to the field," writes a Southern farm woman, "and I have seen their little faces blistered by the hot sun. . . . Husband said he intended making our girls plow, and I don't want more children to be slaves. I work in the field, wash, cook, sew, iron, and in fact everything. All the poor Southern

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farm women do." The social and charitable agencies which operate in the great cities and even the smaller towns of America cannot, or do not, reach the victims of such conditions in the country. The only possible solution for the country woman would be her own control of her reproductive powers. Again and again, in these letters to me, these women have prayed for deliverance, and have expressed pathetic willingness to make any sacrifice to gain their emancipation from the bondage into which they have been cast.

The records I have chosen for publication are by no means exceptional. I have not picked them out to harrow the finer feelings of the readers, but rather because they are typical of certain definite phases of enslaved motherhood in America. They illustrate concretely how every social and economic problem of our civilization is complicated and rendered more difficult of solution by being so closely interwoven with that of slave maternity. The letters fall naturally into a number of distinct groups, which are indicated in each successive chapter. We shall see, if we have the patience to read attentively, how impossible it is for the family burdened by an ever increasing brood of unwelcome babies to extricate itself from the mire of poverty. We shall see how girl-wives, burdened with premature pregnancies and childbirths, are dragged down into this mire, and are made prematurely old by the clash of instincts and environments over which they have no control. Another group of letters reveals the pathetic tragedies of that type of woman who cannot escape from the cruel trap of maternity, whose life is spent in a veritable succession of incessant pregnancies and childbearing. In all

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of them we may read of the terrible cost of bearing children—the inestimable waste of human energy and human effort.

One great student of the problem of reproduction has declared that mankind goes on bearing its young as it did in the Stone Age. Primitive man, alas, may have gone about this important racial business with crudity and brutality. But he was not confronted in addition with the problems of congenital defect, of weak bodies unfit to carry on the race. In a certain number of the records here presented, we discover women not only enslaved by poverty and instinct, but cruelly smitten by hereditary diseases and physiological defects—which they wish to avoid transmitting to their children.

Despite their limitations, their lack of education, these mothers reveal themselves strangely conscious of their duty to the race, of the sacredness of their maternal function, of their realization that the life-stream must be kept clean and fresh. Because of this, their appeals ring with an irresistible pathos, a stabbing intensity that cannot fail to bring tears to the eyes of any but the most calloused cynic.

Others reveal the tragedy of childhood—the mother's desire to save her own children from the disastrous trap of life into which she herself has unwittingly fallen; the tragedy of the unwelcome child, of the neurasthenic mother who breaks down under the excessive burden under which she labors; the discouragement of the father; the lowering of the standard of living which the family had once so courageously set for itself.

Still another group confesses that no matter how great nor how protracted the punishment, there is no cessation of

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that ruthless, relentless force which might be made so tractable a slave, but which uncontrolled becomes so inhuman a master. Some tell of husbands who look upon their wives as mere breeding-machines; others of husbands loving and considerate, who do everything in their power to cooperate, yet who are always defeated by the timid passivity of the family physician who feels that his duty is accomplished when he has given a perfunctory warning of impending dangers.

There is pathos in those recitals of the young wife's effort to retain the romantic love of her husband, even though her youthful beauty has been immolated on the altar of enforced maternity and made a living sacrifice to the cruel gods of reproduction.

Those confessions of self-imposed continence throw new light upon an ignored aspect of marriage in America. These narratives indicate to what lengths husbands and wives are willing to go when they have become awakened to the penalties of excessive child-bearing. Deprived of more humane methods, they are driven to deny Love itself in order to sustain life.

The American public has shuddered with horror at recent exposures of the tragedies of womankind in India and the cynical bestiality of the white slave traffic in South America. But because women are enslaved in distant lands, we should not jump to the facile conclusion that they have attained freedom in our own country. It is an easy gesture to point to the millions of dollars expended annually upon charities and philanthropies, to repeat the current platitudes concerning our national prosperity and the well-being of the working classes. The fact remains, as the testi-

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mony I herewith present proves, that here in our own country we are countenancing a type of slavery that is a disgrace to American ideals and that constitution which guarantees to every citizen the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In presenting this testimony to the jury of the intelligent American public, I am violating no misplaced confidence. Nothing essential to the truth has been suppressed; but details by which the writers might be identified have been withheld. The letters are published with the earnest hope that this book will help toward the eradication of the conditions so poignantly depicted in them.